DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 354 063 PS 021 017

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TITLE Pragmatic Language in Early Childhood Education: Behavior and Thought in Teaching.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Atlanta, GA, April 12-16, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Class Activities; *Classroom Communication; Discourse Analysis; *Elementary School Teachers; Language Research; Primary Education; *Speech Communication; Student Behavior; *Student Participation; Teacher Behavior; *Teacher Student Relationship; Verbal Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Pragmatism

ABSTRACT

A study of language interactions between teachers and students in early childhood (K-3) settings examined teacher responses that encouraged, prevented, or stopped a child's attempts to participate in language interactions with the teacher. Thirty early childhood teachers were observed for 90 sessions of language arts instruction. Tabulations were made for the modes of instructing and for controlling the relationship between the learner and the environment. Tabulations were also made for four categories during oral exchanges between teacher and student: (1) sustaining, in which the teacher makes a neutral comment or a brief passing response that acknowledges the student's oral contribution without influencing the student; (2) extending, in which the teacher encourages an expansion of the student's thought and language by challenging, giving information, or adding new materials; (3) changing, in which the teacher redirects the student's thought and language toward new ideas, materials, or activities while keeping the student engaged; and (4) stopping, in which the teacher limits or halts the student's ideas and language verbally or nonverbally, with the intent of disengaging the student. Findings revealed a significant linear relationship between the instructing mode, and the extending and sustaining categories in all grades. The most significant interactions between modes and categories occurred in kindergarten, and the least significant in grade two. Kindergarten and grade one had the highest incidents of extending and sustaining in the instructing mode. Language that functioned to stop teacher-student interaction was only significant in grade two. (HOD)

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Pragmatic Language in Early Childhood Education: Behavior and Thought In Teaching

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Pragmatic Language In Early Childhood Education: Behavior And Thought In Teaching

Abstract

This study attempted to document current language interaction practices in selected early childhood settings. Teacher language responses that encouraged, prevented or stopped a child's attempt to be a language participant in the on-going life of the classroom were studied. Thirty early childhood teachers were observed for 90 sessions of 30 minute duration during language arts lessons in their own classrooms. Tabulations were made in 2 modes (instruct, manage), and across 4 categories (extend, change, sustain and stop).

Pearson product-moment correlations revealed a significant linear relationship between the instruct mode, and extend and sustain categories of teacher-pupil language interaction in all grades (K-3). The most significant interaction occurred in kindergarten, and the lowest significant interaction occurred in 2nd grade.

Descriptive methods were employed to derive means and standard deviations. Kindergarten and 1st grade displayed the highest incidents of extend and sustain, in the instruct mode for teacher-pupil language interaction. In examining all grades, 2nd grade teacher-pupil language interactions were significantly lower in quantity and quality when compared to each grade, and all grades as a group. Language that functioned to stop teacher-pupil interaction was only significant in the 2nd grade.

Pragmatic Language in Preschool: Behavior and Thought in Teaching

Introduction

It was Piaget (1959), and Chomsky (1968), who taught us an appreciation for language in personal and social contexts. Teacher/learner interactions at all levels of schooling are based primarily upon a transfer of information through the use of language. In these teaching/learning environments, language, as a natural consequence of development, is used to inform, educate, control and influence.

Learned societies, and theorists associated with early childhood education have historically taken the position that didactic instruction of discrete skills as an approach to teaching children from preschool to the third grade is inappropriate (Morgan, 1988; Gotts, 1988; Kamii, 1985; Cazden, 1981). They suggest that the teaching-learning environment must respond to the learner's developmental level by greater attention being paid to how children learn rather than what they should be taught. In this context, language

and interaction between children and adults are deemed essential (Perret-Clermont, 1980; Goodman, 1986; Attneger, et. al. 1987; Pearson, 1989).

Early cognitive development of 3 to 5 year old children, for example, enable them to use symbols to represent reality. When a child in a day care center moves about the house-keeping corner and tells another child, "You be the mommy and I will be the daddy," it is a complex step in the child's understanding of language and behavior. Here, one kind of behavior symbolizes that of another kind. This language and behavior is replete with meaning. The child's behaviors are influenced by representative nuances that reflect the meaning of mommy and daddy, and various other adult mannerisms. These events are related primarily to <u>semantic meaning</u> because they concern the relationship between experiences and objects in language. (Dimitracopoulou, 1990; Kamii, 1985; Kuchinskas, 1982; Biber, et. al. 1971).

Dore (1975), makes a distinction between <u>semantic</u> and <u>pragmatic</u> meaning in language.

Pragmatic meanings are defined as language usage that has some function. This study was concerned primarily with the pragmatic aspects of the teacher/child interactions. The language of the teacher frequently serves several functions, among them is to extend, sustain, change or stop the child's action or speech. These selected categories can occur in two modes, when the teacher is conducting a learning session (instruct), or controlling the relationship between the learner and the environment (manage) (Grossman & Keyes, 1985). The pragmatic nature of the categories was defined in the following terms:

Sustaining

> During an oral interchange between pupil and teacher, the teacher makes a neutral comment or a brief passing response that acknowledges the pupil's oral contribution without influence.

Extending

During an oral interchange between pupil and teacher, the teacher encourages an expansion of the pupil's thought and language by challenging, giving information, and/or adding new materials.

Changing

During an oral interchange, the teacher redirects the learner's thought and language toward new ideas, materials or activities, while keeping the learner engaged.

Stopping

During an oral interchange, the teacher limits or halts the learner's ideas and language verbally or nonverbally, with the intent of disengagement.

Method

Subjects

For this study, 30 teachers in grades kindergarten through 3 were selected from 3 different counties in a southeastern state. The means for class size was 17.5 for kindergarten, 21.5 for first grade, 21.1 for second grade and 21.2 for third grade. For all grades as a total group, the means for male pupils was 11.3; and 9.5 for females. Means for black pupils was .79 for black males; and .44 for black female pupils. The mean for white females was 8.7; and 10.6 for white males. The teachers were all white females with a mean of teaching experience in years of 11.9. There were 6 kindergarten, 10 first grade, 6 second grade and 8 third grade classrooms selected for this study. Participants were selected from among 9 schools in North Georgia. Schools in this study varied in terms of the number of grade levels in each location, and that accounts for the uneven grade distribution.

Procedure

This study was designed to examine the extent to which the teacher's response to a child-initiated language encounter served a pragmatic function that encouraged, modified or discouraged the child as a classroom participant.

The teacher's oral responses to a pupil's initiated language interaction was recorded. Language interaction initiated by the child, and the teacher's response was our unit of analysis. Teachers in each grade were observed on three different occasions spread over a 3 week period for 30 minute teaching sessions in areas of language arts (reading, writing, story-telling, and related activities), for a total of 90 sessions.

Eighteen observations were done in kindergarten, 30 observations in first grade, eighteen observations in second grade and 24 observations in third grade. Observers were trained early childhood teachers who were enrolled in a graduate research course.

The teacher in the classroom has a planned use of language that has pragmatic and semantic meaning, in two primary modes - to instruct and to manage. When pupils are asked to organize in groups, line up for leaving the room, informed about safety procedures prior to a trip or discuss rules of behavior posted in the classroom - these are examples of the teacher giving information in the management mode. When the teacher was explaining how to solve a math problem, reading a story to the group or discussing literature, lecturing on a chemical reaction, or a biological phenomenon - this was in the instruct mode.

For this study, pragmatic language was defined as language interaction that was functional (Watzlawick, et.al., 1967; Dore, 1985; Clark and Clark, 1987). The selected pragmatic functions were teacher responses of extend, change, sustain or stop, to child-initiated language interaction.

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Results

Pearson product-moment correlations were employed to measure the strength of the linear relationships between the paired variables - modes (manage, instruct) and categories (extend, change, sustain, stop). Results are displayed in Tables I through V.

For grades kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, as a total group, the most significant interaction occured between the instruct mode and extending category (Table I).

Interactions between the instruct mode, and extend and sustain were the most significant in kindergarten - .86 and .88, respectively (Table II). The least significant interaction in the instruct mode, during extend and sustain, occurred in the 2nd grade - .76 and .64 respectively. Second grade also showed the only significant interaction between the management mode and stop category (Table IV).

Significant interactions occurred between the management mode and the sustain category (.53),

and extend category (.75), in kindergarten (Table II). This could be of particular interest, because of all 4 grades, no other grade displayed a significant interaction between this mode and these categories.

It is also true, that for kindergarten only, there were significant interactions between the instruct mode and change category (.58), and the manage mode and change category (.68) (Table II).

For all grades, there was a significant interaction between the instruct mode and the two categories of sustain (.71), and extend (.80), (Table I).

We also employed descriptive methods to determine means and standard deviations to demonstrate the extent to which the teachers responses to child-initiated language either encouraged, discouraged or modified the child as participant.

In Table VI, the computations of means and standard deviations by grade, displays kindergarten and first grade as having the highest mean averages in extend (8.25, 8.30), and sustain,

in the instruct mode (6.85: 8.03, respectively). When compared to all other grades, 2nd grade displayed the lowest mean for extend (6.63), and sustain (4.75), in the instruct mode. Second grade also showed the lowest mean (15.75), for total interaction in the instruct mode. First grade displayed the highest mean (22.1), for total interaction in the instruct mode. First grade displayed the highest mean (22.1), for total interaction in the instruct mode. Means for 3rd grade indicated less language interaction in the total manage mode (6.24), when compared to all other grades (Table IV).

From kindergarten through 3rd grade there was a linear reduction in manage mode means (10.55: 10.17: 9.00: and 6.24, respectively).

DISCUSSION

Historically, early childhood programs have placed an emphasis upon language interaction as an essential component of childhood learning (Piaget, 1959: Biber, et. al., 1971: Cazden, 1981: Torey, et.al., 1988: Dimitracopoulou, 1990). This study

attempted to determine the pragmatic quality of this interaction, and the extent to which this quality extends throughout early grades - kindergarten through grade 3. Teachers with early childhood training, certification and experience were selected for this study, became such a group would more likely than not, represent a cross-secttion of the philosophy, theory and practice in early childhood education of their time.

An interpretation of correlational data generated by this study suggests that teacher-child language interaction in all 4 grades significantly sustain and extend the learner's participation during instruction. These interactions, though significant in all grades, were more significant in kindergarten. For 2nd grade the same categories (extend, sustain), and mode (instruct), had the lowest interaction significance when compared to other grades. It is also true, 2nd grade is the only grade that showed a significant interaction between stopping behavior and the manage mode (Table IV).

When descriptive methods are employed, the means for extend and sustain during instruction are more significant when compared to change and stop. This is a highly desirable outcome because early childhood professionals define their work as creating a language-rich environment where child participation is encouraged (Biber, 1984; Kamii, 1985; Genish, 1987). The means in stop categories were less significant, when compared to the means in other categories for other grades, and all grades as a group. Language that effectively inhibits interaction, is less likely to be supported by early childhood professionals, therefore, this outcome is also deemed as desirable.

In the desirable categories of extend, sustain - and under some circumstances change - 1st grade had the most significant means, with kindergarten second. For these same categories, 2nd grade has the least significant means when compared to all other grades (Table VI).

Another desirable outcome is displayed in the total means for both modes - instruct and manage.

For all grades, the means for the function of manage (which can be counterproductive to learning), is far less significant than instruct. The total means for instruct are at least double the significance of manage means. For 3rd grade, instruct means are more than 3 times the significance of manage means (Table VI).

This study examined a cross-section of various methodologies in classroom practice in the early grades. The findings indicate that early childhood classroom practice is highly compatible with basic philosophy and theory in the field. This study was not designed to support or evaluate any particular method(s) in early childhood.

Within the past ten years, however, there has been a movement toward a greater emphasis on the role of language in the classroom. A major force within this context has been labelled, the whole language approach to teaching. Teachers who support the theory and practice related to this method, request the power and authority to integrate a variety of media into classroom actitivies, as well as the option to reject or

modify packaged language arts units and sequenced reading texts (Goodman, 1986; Attwerger, et.al. 1987; Pearson, 1989).

The current emphasis upon whole language is in harmony with methods and materials commonly found in early childhood environments. Even as computers are introduced in early childhood, the role of the learner is proactive and creative - not passive (Kuchinskas, 1982).

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Correlations Between Variables
All Grades

	Instruct	Manage	Sustain	Extend	Change
Instruct	1.0000	.1216	.7053	.8043	.3326
Manage		1.0000	.2575	.0847	.4093
Sustain			1.0000	.3038	.2826
Extend				1.0000	.1990
Change					1.0000
Stop					

TABLE II

Correlations Between Variables
Kindergarten

	Instruct	Manage	Sustain	Extend	Change
Instruct	1.0000	.5051	.8785	.8603	.5572
Manage		1.0000	.5350	.7513	.6768
Sustain			1.0000	.7032	.3439
Extend				1.0000	.7002
Change					1.0000
Stop					

TABLE III

Correlations Between Variables
First Grade

	Instruct	Manage	Sustain	Extend	Change
Instruct	1.0000	.0375	.8058	.7734	.3275
Manage		1.0000	.2587	.3276	.3745
Sustain			1.0000	.5393	.0919
Extend				1.0000	.2807
Change					1.0000
Stop					

TABLE IV

Correlations Between Variables
Second Grade

	Instruct	Manage	Sustain	Extend	Change
Instruct	1.0000	.1355	.6444	.7552	.3608
Manage		1.0000	.4466	.1580	.4861
Sustain			1.0000	.2186	.5185
Extend				1.0000	.1186
Change					1.0000
Stop					

TABLE V

Correlations Between Variables
Third Grade

	Instruct	Manage	Sustain	Extend	Change
Instruct	1.0000	.2053	.7595	.7621	.2858
Manage		1.0000	.1294	.1294	.3279
Sustain			.3052	.3052	.2216
Extend			1.0000	1.0000	.2895
Change					1.0000
Stop					

TABLE VI

KINDERGARTEN

	Extend		Change		Sustain		Stop		Totals	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Instruct	8.25	5.57	3.65	1.90	6.85	6.67	2.15	1.81	20.90	13.00
Manage	1.30	1.75	3.35	2.30	2.60	4.41	3.25	2.34	10.55	6.23
Totals	9.55	5.82	7.00	2.73	8.95	8.57	5.55	3.10		

GRADE 1

	Extend		Change		Sustain		Stop		Totals	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Instruct	8.30	5.60	3.00	1.97	8.03	6.53	2.20	2.02	22.10	11.72
Manage	1.97	1.85	2.57	2.05	2.97	3.77	2.87	2.19	10.17	6.35
Totals	10.20	5.68	5.73	2.96	10.93	8.97	5.10	2.85		

GRADE 2

	Extend		Change		Sustain		Stop		Totals	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Instruct	6.63	5.19	2.32	1.83	4.75	3.31	1.00	1.25	15.74	7.56
Manage	1.68	2.11	2.95	2.17	1.74	1.28	2.68	1.34	9.00	4.04
Totals	9.05	6.28	5.26	2.81	6.74	3.65	3.68	1.67		

GRADE 3

	Extend		Change		Sustain		Stop		Totals	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Instruct	7.12	8.00	3.08	1.49	6.65	6.77	2.40	3.24	20.12	13.88
Manage	1.36	1.47	1.16	1.18	1.96	2.78	1.76	1.09	6.24	4.05
Totals	8.60	7.87	4.28	1.77	8.88	9.01	4.13	3.21		

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